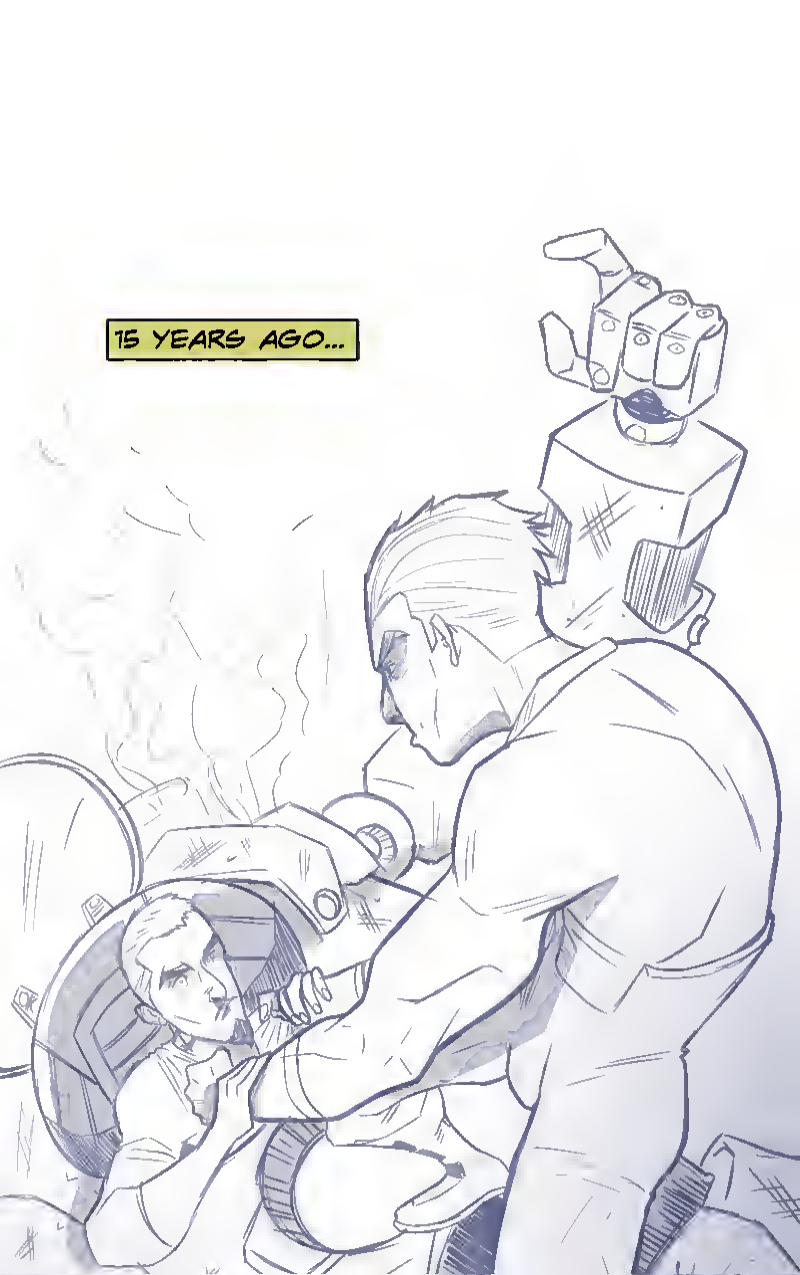
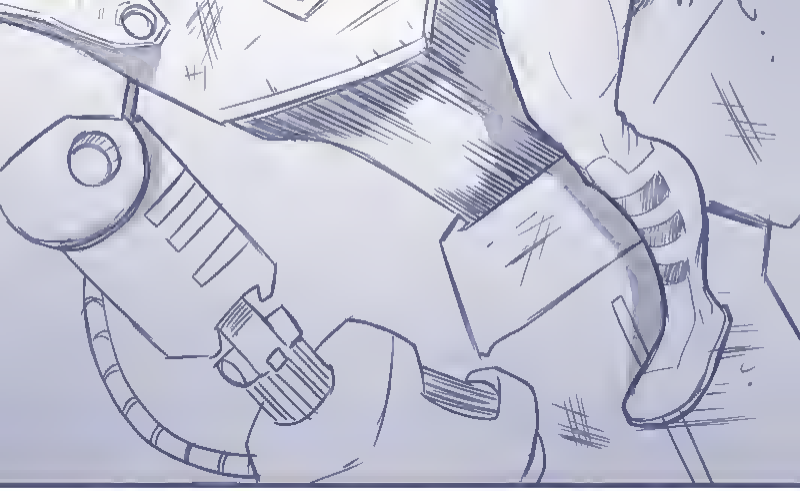

15 YEARS AGO...



THE BADGUYS

LANCASTER·CAICEDO·RAYMOND

TWO FUNERALS

"WE HAVE LOST THE BEST OF US. HE WAS TAKEN, KILLED BY A MADMAN. HE HAD TRIED BEFORE, DOZENS OF TIMES. BUT THIS TIME HE HELD NOTHING BACK. DESTROIKA, THE MAN WHO SAW ALL THE ANGLES, WHO PLAYED THE GAME LIKE A GRANDMASTER, LEFT HIMSELF WITH NO WAY OUT. NO ONE KNOWS WHAT FINALLY BROKE INSIDE HIM. WHY HIS HATE, HIS OBSESSION DROVE HIM TO THIS POINT."

THE MORRIGAN STOOD BEFORE THE CROWD. SHE STOOD THERE, TALKING ABOUT THE MAN THEY KNEW AS IF HE WAS JUST THE PICTURE THEY SAW.

"MAYBE THE MIRACLE SAW NO OTHER WAY TO END IT. MAYBE HE WAS LEFT WITH NO CHOICE. WITH THOUSANDS DEAD, WITH THE CITY IN RUINS, HE WOULD TRADE HIMSELF TO TAKE THAT BACK, TO STOP IT EVER HAPPENING AGAIN. DESTROIKA STILL LIVES. IT WAS LUCK THAT THE BOLT FINALLY STOPPED HIM. HAD IT BEEN ME, HE WOULD NOT HAVE SEEN ANOTHER DAWN."

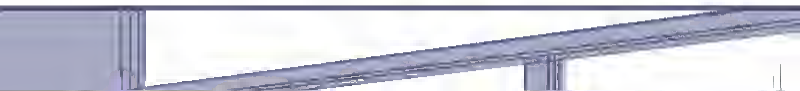
SHE GRIPPED THE SIDES OF THE PODIUM, HEARING THE WOOD SPLINTER BENEATH HER FINGERS. THE MORRIGAN IS FURY. THE MORRIGAN IS VENGEANCE. THE MORRIGAN IS

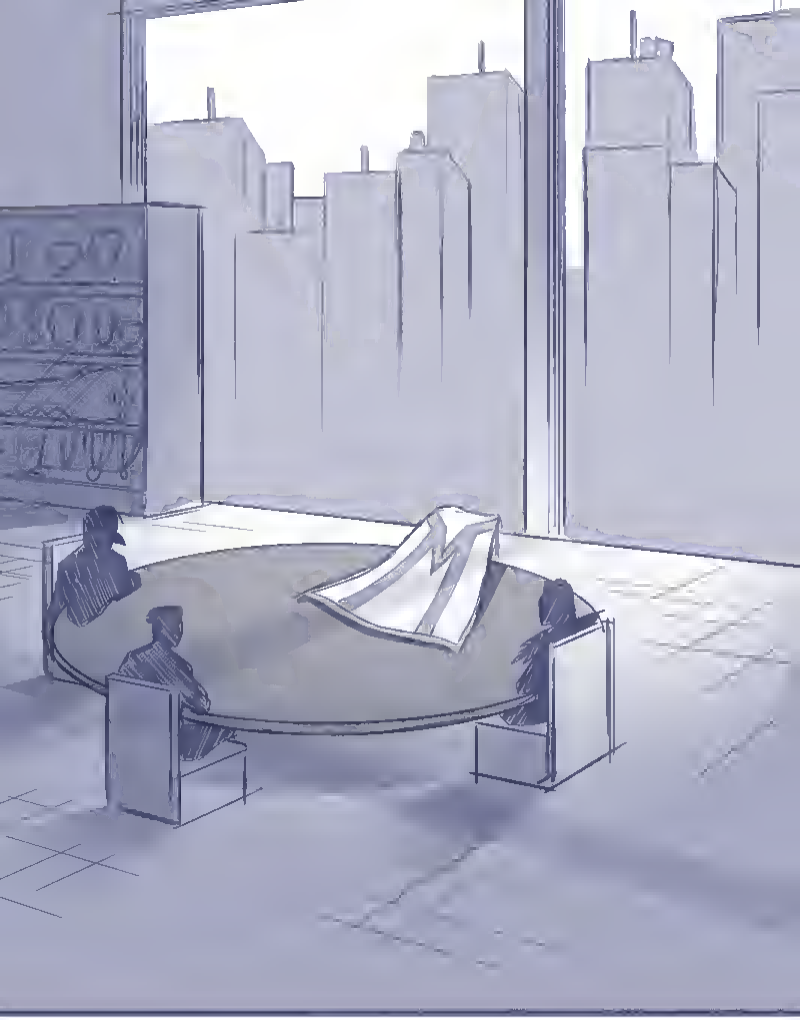
MORRIGAN IS VENGEANCE. THE MORRIGAN IS DEATH AND DESTINY. THIS IS WHAT SHE TOLD HERSELF WHILE SHE HEARD HER OWN HEART POUNDING.

"HE TOOK TOO MUCH FROM ME. FROM US ALL."

SHE LOOKED OUT ACROSS THE CROWD WITH CLEAR EYES. THE MORRIGAN DID NOT WEEP. IT WAS LATE IN THE DAY AND THE SUN WAS LOW. IT FELL BEHIND THE STATUE OF HIM, THE MONUMENT THEY HAD ERECTED TO REMEMBER WHAT HE HAD GIVEN. SHE FELT COLD, STANDING IN THE LONG SHADOW IT CAST.

"THE MIRACLE: IT WASN'T JUST A NAME. IT WAS A PROMISE. A PROMISE OF THE IMPOSSIBLE, A PROMISE THAT HE WAS THE IMPOSSIBLE. THAT EVEN WHEN HOPE HAD FADED, HE WOULD BE THERE TO SAVE US. WE HAVE LOST THE BEST OF US. KNOW NOW THAT WE HAVE LOST THE MIRACLE, BUT WE OWE HIM THIS: THIS CITY IS PROTECTED."





LATER IN THE DAY, THEY GATHERED, ALONE, WHERE THE FOUR OF THEM USED TO MEET.

"I'M LEAVING" SAID THE MORRIGAN. "THIS IS

NOT MY COUNTRY. THESE ARE NOT MY PEOPLE. NOW THAT HE IS GONE, I WILL RETURN HOME."

SHE LOOKED OVER AT THE CHAIR THAT WAS ONCE HIS, DRAPED IN THE CAPE HE ONCE WORE.

"HE WOULD HAVE WANTED US TO STAY," SAID THE MASQUE. HIS VOICE WAS FLAT, MUFFLED BEHIND THE MASK.

"DON'T PRESUME TO TELL ME WHAT HE WOULD HAVE WANTED. NOT TODAY."

"THINK ABOUT THE POWER VACUUM THIS CREATES. NEW PLAYERS."

"NO. IT'S NOT THE SAME. NO ONE HAD DESTROIKA'S MIND. HIS ANGER. THE GAME CHANGES, AND I DO NOT WISH TO PLAY IT ANY LONGER."

SHE LOOKED OVER TO THE CORNER. DESTROIKA'S SUIT LOOMED THERE, NEWLY POLISHED, ALONGSIDE OTHER RELICS FROM PAST BATTLES.

"DID YOU NEED TO KEEP IT?"

"IT'S A TROPHY ROOM, MOR," SAID THE BOLT.

"THAT ISN'T A TROPHY. THIS WASN'T A VICTORY." THE MORRIGAN, RISING AND LEAVING LIKE A STORM CLOUD, LEFT THE ROOM. IN ALL THE TIME IT TOOK HER TO RETURN TO ENGLAND, SHE DID NOT WEEP.

THE BOLT AND THE MASQUE SAT THERE IN SILENCE.

"THEY'RE GIVING ME THE KEY TO THE CITY FOR STOPPING DESTROIKA," SAID BOLT. "I'LL STAY. DO WHAT I CAN IN GARDEN CITY."

HE COULDN'T TELL IF THE MASQUE WAS LOOKING AT HIM OR NOT, BUT HE COULDN'T HOLD THE GAZE OF THOSE BLACK SLITS.

"THEY'RE STILL OUT THERE, IN THE SQUARE. CANDLELIGHT VIGIL."

"HE MEANT A LOT TO US ALL," SAID THE MASQUE, FINALLY. "THE PEOPLE HE SAVED. THE PEOPLE WHO LOOKED UP TO HIM. THE PEOPLE WHO LOVED HIM."

"SO WHAT HAPPENS NOW?"

"WE MOVE ON. WORSE FOR IT AND NOT STRONGER. THEY WON'T STOP. THEY WON'T

CHANGE." THE MASQUE ROSE FROM HIS CHAIR. "I'M GOING BACK TO FIVE POINTS. THIS ISN'T MY CITY EITHER. WITHOUT HIM, WITH DESTROIKA ROTTING IN HIS CELL, THERE'S NO NEED FOR US HERE."

"DO YOU THINK HE'S GONE? I MEAN, REALLY GONE? HE'S COME BACK BEFORE."

"I DON'T KNOW, MAX. TODAY I STOPPED BELIEVING IN MIRACLES."

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